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The Attorney General, Back in the Glare Of the Spotlight

By Lois Romano
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Ed Meese was acting like the deputy president again.

At yesterday's stunning press conference, after a brief introduction by President Reagan, the attorney general stepped behind the podium and informed the incredulous White House press corps that some \$10 million to \$30 million from the already controversial sale of U.S. arms to Iran had found its way into the war chests of the Nicaraguan contras.

What's more, Meese stated flatly that—despite the operation's apparent origins at the National Security Council, in the very basement of the Executive Mansion—Ronald Reagan hadn't known a thing about it.

The president's longtime alter ego and California intimate was doing the thing he has always done best, said Meese spokesman Patrick Korten: "Protecting Ronald Reagan. Nobody does it better."

"You can't know what all seventeen hundred people are doing in the executive office of the president," Meese said later in the afternoon during an interview at the Justice Department. "When someone does something that is not correct and then this is not reported to the president, I don't think he can be held responsible for that . . ."

Meese spoke as he often does: cheerfully, cautiously and without any of the nervous energy often found in Type-A public officials. He wore a gray suit and his trademark Adam Smith tie, and sat comfortably in the attorney general's conference room, a cavernous football field of a place that used to be Robert Kennedy's private office.

"Remember this," he said when asked if he wasn't furious with those who had orchestrated this operation. "The people who were doing it felt they were doing it for a good purpose . . . But it was still tremendously frustrating to have a very valuable policy goal of the president at

least partially harmed by the fact that things were done that shouldn't have been done.

"The important thing is that as soon as he knew there was even a possibility [of improper behavior], he took action."

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It all started, Meese said, as he was helping to prepare the administration's congressional testimony on its most recent foreign policy debacle: the revelation that the United States had secretly shipped arms to Iran. He said he called the president to suggest coordinating administration testimony on the issue so that no one would be "blindsided by us not knowing something that might be going on."

With a team of Justice Department lawyers, Meese said, he worked "almost continuously" from Friday night until Monday morning, when he first informed the president of his discoveries. Early yesterday, he met privately with Reagan, Chief of Staff Donald Reagan and Vice President George Bush, who decided that Meese was the man to break the grim news to congressional leaders, the press and the nation.

It's been a rough six years for Ed Meese. He arrived in Washington as the Reagan administration's indispensable man, the White House aide whose access and influence was supreme. Dubbed "the Deputy President" and "President Meese," he came with a reputation as the man who summarized problems for Reagan, presenting all sides as fairly as possible, though he would later be viewed as a conduit for conservative views.

But Meese never seemed to live up to his potential for clout.

James Baker was named chief of staff, emerging as the in-house power while Meese's star fell. Meese's 19-year-old son was killed in an automobile accident, a tragedy from which Meese was slow to recover. After he was nominated to replace William French Smith at Justice, Meese's personal financial dealings—though never found to be illegal—drew intense scrutiny and criticism. As attorney general, he has been active on numerous legal fronts, but is perhaps best known for one of his least successful efforts: the controversial Commission on Pornography. (At a press conference about the commission's report, Meese spoke in front of "The Spirit of Justice," a naked female statue in the Justice Department's Great Hall; the resulting photograph ran nationwide and caused the attorney general considerable embarrassment.)

But yesterday, it all seemed to come full circle for Meese, and he became Ronald Reagan's right hand once again.

Meese said in the interview that the administration decided to go public now, without having all the facts, to show that it wasn't holding anything back.

"We felt that this was the kind of thing that if there was any appearance of concealment, the public would misunderstand," he said. "That's why we departed from our usual procedure of waiting until the investigation was complete, because of the public attention of the subject generally."

Meese said he was still investigating whether anyone else knew of the operation aside from those he mentioned at the press conference: national security adviser John Poindexter, who has resigned; Poindexter's aide, Lt. Col. Oliver North, who has been removed from his post; and former national security adviser Robert McFarlane.

"Within the American government we know that certain people knew about it, including those persons knowing some aspect of it," he said. "I cannot say at this point—we think there may have been others who may have been working in some capacity with Colonel North and may have had some knowledge, and that's something."

He maintained that CIA Director

A William Casey knew nothing of the operation.

"I know for a fact that Bill Casey did not know anything about it," he said. "And beyond that, the CIA, from what we know at the present time, had nothing to do with the transfer of funds to Central America."

Meese said he met with Poindexter Monday, at which time "he told me he has thought for some period of time it would be appropriate for him to resign." Although he met with North over the weekend, he said, they never discussed the possibility of North resigning.

Before Meese briefed the press yesterday, Reagan announced that he would appoint "a special review board" to review the procedures of the National Security Council. Meese said he will continue his investigation as well, "pursuing material along these lines. First of all, total examination of all the facts. Secondly, any identification of any wrongdoing, any criminal acts that may be involved. And thirdly, a recommendation to the president of any disciplinary action and procedural changes it might be involved."

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Asked how a midlevel staffer at the NSC could conduct an operation of this nature virtually on his own, Meese said, "That's how it was done—because no one did know." He said he was going to recommend that except in "very special situations," the NSC should not be involved in operational activities. "Their job is to serve as coordinators and advisers to the president and not as operational elements of national security policy," he said.

Reminded of his seeming haste to terminate yesterday's press conference for a luncheon engagement, he laughed. "It was the annual lunch the president has with the Supreme Court," he said, "so I wanted to at least get to the lunch, even though late."

And so, after a 14-year career with Ronald Reagan spanning the California governorship, three presidential campaigns and the White House, was Ed Meese the only man Reagan could trust to rescue the twilight of his presidency?

"Well, I never like to make statements that appear self-serving," he said with a chuckle and a shrug. "So I'm going to let you draw any conclusions you want."